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STORYCRAFTING METHOD–TO SHARE, PARTICIPATE, TELL AND LISTEN IN PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

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Abstract

Children need to be heard and to have the right to affect everyday action. Despite the growing increase in research relating to children there is a discrepancy between theory and (research) practice. Also, the experienced childhood is from time to time seen simplified because of the methods and rectilinear analyses. We need easily adaptable methods that take into account children's ways of acting. The participatory and narrative Storycrafting method is a Finnish social innovation, which has been used and further developed for more than 30 years. In my article, I ask how Storycrafting works with children in practical interactions and as a research method? What are the standpoints and theoretical background of the Storycrafting method? I analyze the Storycrafting method from several perspectives: theoretical, interactional and cultural practice. Studies have shown that Storycrafting has created time and space to encounter children and to share with and listen to them. Children are able to influence matters concerning themselves. Through the method children are empowered: they become accustomed to explaining their ideas. With Storycrafting, professionals have a participatory method that can be adapted to different situations and is a workable method for use with children, as well as with the youth, with people of working age and with seniors.

Keywords: Storycrafting method, research method, children, childhood, reciprocity, children's voices, participation, agency, learning

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1. Introduction

Children need to be heard and have the right to affect everyday action. It is not only a goal for practitioners in different sectors but above all an obligation (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; national legislation, e.g. the Constitution of Finland). In recent years methods for listening to children and youth have been developed but it is not problem-free. The good intentions are not always actualizing in practice; it is not easy to find methods for on-going everyday use and especially for younger children.

The research also needs participatory and empowering methods with children. There has even been increasing development in research methods with which children could be listened to, for instance with participatory methods and methods for "children as researchers" (e.g. Clark, 2011), visual methods (Einarsdottir, 2005; Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Thomson, 2008), and mosaic approach (e.g. Clark & Moss 2005) in the domain of childhood studies (e.g. Corsaro, 2005), studies of child perspective (e.g. Karlsson, 2012a), and ethnographic research (e.g. Ruckenstein, 2010).

On the other hand, children's own (narrative) culture needs to be visible and taken into account. Especially small children do not have resources to document and to archive their artefacts and bring them into significant societal discussions. Children's cultural activities often remain invisible (Karlsson, 2012a). There is still need for studied, easily adaptable methods in practice and research that take into account children's ways of acting.

2. The Narratives and Narrativity

The use of narrativity in different contexts and research has in the recent decades aroused increasing interest in different branches of science (the narrative turn or boom, e.g. Riessman, 2003). Life can be perceived as stories moving at different levels, such as stories of experiences and events through which we interpret life and ourselves. The understandings, values and norms stored in our minds through experiences define the kind of stories we live and tell ourselves and others. A story is a way to organize and unify our experiences (Carr 1986, 65). Narrative builds understanding of the self, the others, and the world. Narrative meaning structures can be distributed to different modes of existence: the lived, the told and the inner modes, which affect each other (narrative circulation, Hänninen, 2004). The stories lived are related to a person's life. A told story is a story told to someone else, and an inner story is the story a person tells him/herself about the past, the present, or the future.

Yet it is a simplification to say that experience is reflected in stories as it is (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). Personal narrative is always also related to stories stored in general knowledge and culture, and to topical issues and imagination. Narrative is always dynamic,

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and it is bound to time and place. Narrative is influenced by the reasons for narrating, and the listeners and their intentions and reactions.

Narrative research focuses mainly on adult narrative, and often on adult life experience (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Hänninen, 2004; Stenberg, 2011). Children's narrative and narrative knowledge are only now becoming a subject of interest (e.g., Engel 2006; Karlsson, 1999; 2012; Lähteenmäki, 2013; Puroila, Estola, & Syrjälä, 2012; Viljamaa, 2012).

There has been demand for listening to children and for free narrative. Methods of collecting children's stories have also been previously applied to some extent but they have always been strictly defined by the researcher or by other adults. The children have been asked either to 1) describe pictures chosen by adults, 2) repeat the story told by the adult, 3) tell about their own experiences, 4) tell about their own understanding of a certain situation, or 5) invent a story of their own (Rutanen, 1999). These five ways of producing material set limits and opportunities to children's freedom of expression and creative activities.

Requesting a story based on pictures chosen by adults has been used as a traditional pedagogical exercise, and also as a psychological test where the setting of the assignment rules out most of the narrative options. Repeating the story of an adult doesn't give space to a child's spontaneous action. Therefore, this type of assignment has been used particularly in research analyzing memory and the development of thinking (Rutanen, 1999). There the child is not asked to produce a new story; instead, his/her ability to repeat is tested. When a child is asked to tell about a certain topic, about his/her own experience or understandings, the child is given more space than in the situation described above. Yet it is very seldom that adults giving the assignment validate their motives, and the child does not necessarily know what is expected of him/her. In these cases, the adult has defined from their own perspective what is essential to tell, and the child is the object in achieving the adult's targets.

Having a child invent his/her own story has been marginal in the research field. Children's stories have been collected with the help of writing contests. The contest setting, however, entails many preconditions. Its main objective is not to listen to the child even though it helps create a valuable collection of culture produced by children. Folklorists have for decades collected large materials. They consist of stories on different topics, written by school children under the supervision of their teachers (Karimäki, 2008). Many collections are stored, for instance, in the folklore archives of the Finnish Literature Society. They contain child-produced stories, the topics of which have usually been carefully instructed. Vivian Paley (1992) has asked children to make up stories of their own. These stories have usually been recorded or written down in standard language, not in the spoken language

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often used by the child. The children have not been told that they can change or correct their own stories.

3. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

There has been demand for the free narrative of and the listening to children, to which the Storycrafting method has responded for its part. This article gathers Storycrafting-related research. The idea is to study how the Storycrafting method is used in the production of children's own knowledge and culture in daily activities and in research. I will explore the standpoints and theoretical background of the Storycrafting method.

Children's storycrafted stories have been collected since 1995 and they amount to ca. 6000. Of these, 3500 stories are in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD). In addition, in 1995–2013 I have gathered material from people using the Storycrafting method, in which they describe the Storycrafting process, its meaning and impact on people at different ages (from 3 months to 98 years) (n=1085). The material described together with previous research form the subtext for the conclusions of this article.

4. The Storycrafting Method

In the Storycrafting method ("sadutus" in Finnish, "sagotering" in Swedish), the child can express him/herself with the words they have chosen and tell about the topic that they are interested in or that is bothering them. When Storycrafting, the story of the child is written down exactly the way the child tells it, after which it is read aloud and the child can correct or change the story. In other words, in Storycrafting the child has the last word on his/her own story. In the process of the development of the Storycrafting method, the word-for-word recording and the opportunity for the child to make corrections proved to be of vital importance even though children seldom wanted to correct anything. In this way, children can make sure that they have been understood the way they meant. At the same time it was indicated that it is interesting and meaningful for the adult to listen to the child and important to store what he/she wants to say. In the following I will study the use of the method more closely.

The instruction of the Storycrafting method is a result of long-lasting research and development[1], mainly in schools and kindergartens. The method was discovered in the 1980's when the prevailing way of working was to interpret children's thinking. There was need for a method that would allow for listening to children's thoughts as told by themselves.

[1] Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, since 2009 the National Institute for Health and Welfare.

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In the course of decades, the Storycrafting method has been developed, applied and studied in different contexts (e.g. Karlsson, 2000; 2009; Karlsson & Riihelä, 2012; Hohti & Karlsson, 2013; Lähteenmäki, 2013; Mäenpää, 2012).

The need to make the interactive relationship more equal first emerged in the work of school psychologists in the 1980's. The professional qualification of school psychologists has traditionally been built on ready structured tests, and the validity of the answers is known to professionals only. The school psychologist Monika Riihelä (1991) started looking for children's own thoughts, reasoning and descriptions of their lives. Because the obstacle for the projection of children's thoughts was the strictly structured methods, she started experimenting on a new open assignment before moving on to the actual topic, concept of time. She asked the children to tell a story they wanted to tell. "I will write it down the way you tell it to me, and the story will be yours" (Riihelä, 1991, p. 32).

The Storyride project coordinated by Stakes2 in 1995–1999 in different parts of Finland wanted to give space to the child's voice in the practices of early education and school as well as child health clinics, libraries and club activities by developing ways of working to support the listening skills of adults (Karlsson, 1999). The Storycrafting method got its name in this project, and it was used nationwide for the first time. In 1996, the method extended to cover all the five Nordic Countries. After this the method has been used in many different countries and operational environments.

The Storycrafting method is based on the premise that regardless of age, gender, cultural background, level of education, or degree of disability, all have something interesting and even important to say; everybody has thoughts, information, and stories that are unique. Every person's thoughts are valuable, worth listening to, and relevant to Storycrafting. The method is easy to use: but the adult (the storycrafter) needs to be equipped with a strong democratic approach to human beings, both children and adults.

5. The Storycrafting in Action

In the Storycrafting method, the adult (the Storycrafter) says to a child or a group of children: "Tell a story that you want. I will write it down just as you will tell it. When the story is ready I will read it aloud. And then if you want you can correct or make any changes" (Karlsson, 2003, 44–79; Riihelä, 1991, pp. 29–33).

In the Storycrafting instruction, the storycrafter first urges the other person to tell her/his story. In other words, he or she does not ask questions like "would you like to tell" because the questions would make the respondent dependent on certain alternatives. Instead, the storycrafter stimulates to storytelling by indicating his/her desire to listen to the other

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person. After this, the storycrafter says what he/she is intending to do: to do a word-for-word recording, to read the recorded story and to correct the text the way the teller wishes to do. In Storycrafting everything is said aloud and done openly. The purpose of the precise instruction is to safeguard transparency and to give the child the power to decide, and to the adult the important role of an active listener. The child or the group of children tells a story of their own choice. The adult writes the story down word for word, exactly as it has been told with no adult's corrections. The story is written down using the words, sentence structures and the phonetic form the teller uses and that he or she wants to have in the story. The adult doesn't ask questions, or demand further explanations, or suggest improvements. The adult does not evaluate the child or his or her abilities. The narrator's own tale is fine and interesting just as it is, in the way he/she presents it. When the story is finished, the adult reads it so that the child or children are allowed to change the text if they want to. Writing down the story alone is not Storycrafting; Storycrafting is always based on interaction and willingness of the storycrafter to listen to the teller. It is up to the teller to decide how the final product will be used. He or she has the copyright of the story.

The Storycrafting method differs from many other narrative methods on the grounds of five essential steps it includes: 1) verbatim (telling the story), 2) writing the story in the presence of the child, 3) reading the written story, 4) the narrator's possible corrections, and 5) reading it aloud to other listeners or publish it in one way or another if the teller allows.

Storycrafting has been performed among people of all ages – children and youth but also among people of working age, and senior citizens. The youngest tellers have been 3 months of age. The Storycrafting event has been carried out in the daily life of the children, either at home or in an institution. For example, the teacher, educator or assistant has storycrafted the child in the classroom when the other children have done their own exercises. Some teacher has storycrafted the pupils in small groups while the others have drawn pictures or just listened to the story. The children have also been storycrafted in private e.g. during a break, after school or at home. In that case the situation is usually most intensive. Sometimes the elder pupils have storycrafted the younger ones. Usually, the children want their story to be read aloud to other children e.g. in preschool, school or library, or to the parents.

Storycrafting has produced stories that reflect children's experiences and ways of thinking and that differ from traditional fairy tales. Because the tellers themselves decide on the form and topic or their stories, they do not necessarily follow any certain type of narrative or genre. In other words, the adult does not require from them the classical structure with a beginning, a middle and an end (Aristotle 335 BC). Neither do the stories have to be

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reports on the teller's life or visions. The stories can consist of a couple of words, or they can be books with several pages, they can be poet-like, or dialogues, or illustrated with pictures and melodies.

The role of the listener is to become an active and dedicated listener and to focus on the teller's story and on an interaction valuing the other party. The following story, told by the 9-year-old boy Petteri, shows the multidimensional way a child observes the nature, the cycle of the seasons, and the child's relationship with the nature.

Petteri's story

The sun shines in the sky.
The birds sing and the crickets play and it is a nice summer's day.
Flowers are blooming and it's summer at last. Winter is far behind.
And the grass is green.
The ant has a little nest at the foot of the tree. Fish swim around in the water.
Gulls fly around in the sky.
The little furry balls are dandelions. Fish jump now and then.
The little fisherman does not catch any fish whatever he does. Big fish chase the smaller fish.
The little bird has a nest on the rock. A little motor boat casts fishing nets. The magpie has a nest in a green tree. A little squirrel runs across the green. Autumn comes again.
Mushrooms begin to grow and the downpours come. Gradually rain turns into sleet.
Finally winter comes. Children play excitedly.
Trees have already dropped their leaves. Children have to keep going inside.

Petteri, 9-year-old boy (told in Finnish)

Little children have been storycrafted by including them in Storycrafting sessions of other children. Sometimes Storycrafting with toddlers (0–2) is started by openly writing down the children's play in the presence of the children, after which the play is read aloud. In this way, even the youngest ones can participate in Storycrafting. In the story of the 3-year-old girl, Riikka, boxes turn into a playing family whose activities are given a rhythm by the rotation of the times of the day.

Once upon a time there was a dad box, a mum box and a baby box. They went out. There they played, play tag. Then they went inside because it got could. The dark

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came. Then the moon was shining. The sun then. Then the cloud went in front of the sun. Then its end.

Riikka, 3 yrs 4 mths (told in Finnish)

The research has shown that even the youngest are capable to narrate in their own way. The human being is not only homo sapiens (a wise man). A human being is actually homo narrans, a born storyteller (see also Niles 1999). With an active and engaged listener anyone, from young children to the elderly, can put their thoughts into words in story form. The challenge is how to listen and understand the children's stories which are often told in a form unfamiliar to the adult.

Stories allow for the use of imagination, and the teller can make the impossible happen. Children also like to use humour and they carnivalize things in their own way. In the story, the 5-year-old boy Toni uses the foreign languageconcept in his own way:

"I have so many secrets that I don't tell them to anybody. They are so complicated that I can't remember them myselfeither. They are – in English.
I can't say them, yet."

Toni, 5-year-old boy (told in Finnish)

6. Storycrafting in Research

Children produce different kinds of information through stories. Firstly, the content of stories created by Storycrafting have been studied, e.g. what children tell about and what is their point of view on their telling, how they handle things and what they are not telling about. Stories have been examined from different viewpoints; for instance, how do children discuss in their stories friendship (Terkki, 1997), death (Riihelä & Karlsson, 2008), shopping (Riihelä, 2012), parenthood (Riihelä, Karimäki, Karlsson, Kemppainen, & Rutanen 2001), initiative (Ojala 2008), happiness and well being (Kuokkanen 2012), eating and food (Karlsson 2012b). Secondly, the form, structure, words and style of children's stories have been studied (e.g. Brostrøm, 1999; Klami, 2005; Rättyä, 2000).

Thirdly, Storycrafting sessions have been analysed as interactive situations – to whom and how the teller is telling – such as group stories (Myllylä, 1998), stories by child asylum applicants (e.g. Lähteenmäki, 2012; 2013), small children's stories (e.g. Rutanen 1999; Riihelä 2012), Storycrafting in schools (e.g. Kautto, 2003; Karlsson, 2013), special

children's stories (Turakka, 2002), Storycrafting as learning a language (Mäenpää, 2012), and adult stories (Stenius, 2004).

Fourthly, the focus has been on the Storycrafting process, for instance how the story comes about, collectively in a reciprocal situation, how the Storycrafting process and being listened to affect the child and adults, their roles as actors, and the participation (Karlsson, 2000; Karlsson & Riihelä, 2012; Rutanen, 1999). Information on the power relations in a community has been collected (e.g. Hohti & Karlsson, 2013) by analysing e.g. what kinds of stories the members of a certain community tell each other, what kind of stories can be told in the first place, and what is left unsaid in certain contexts. When analysing the stories we should take into account that we cannot draw too straightforward conclusions from the "fairy tales" in which creativity and imagination are allowed. Many phenomena need additional research.

7. Conclusions

In Storycrafting, a person is regarded as an innately social actor, an active contributor, and someone with agency, growing up through empowering experiences together with others. Actions are regarded as historically and culturally context-bound. In other words, the Storycrafting session is built up in a certain time and certain place and it is influenced by mechanisms of power and the intentions of the interacting actors. The phenomena are always situated in place, time, actors, and cultures.

The theoretical background of the Storycrafting method is found within cultural studies and a socio-cultural perspective (Cole, 1996; Säljö, 2006; Wertsch, 1998), dialogicity (Bakhtin, 1973), narrativity (Bruner, 1996), playfulness (Huizinga, 1950), childhood studies (i.a. Corsaro 2005), studies of child perspective (Karlsson 2000; 2012a) and research with infants (Huotilainen et al., 2005; Stern, 1992; von Hofsten, 2004). In the background we will also find the demands for democracy of Paolo Freire (1972) and Korney Chukovsky (1963) concerning the rights of children and pupils and the preconditions of narrative and culture.

Many studies on education, upbringing and health care have shown how easily a client – a child or an adult – notices the hidden intentions and expectations of workers (e.g. Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Tainio, 2007). In answering the expectations and questions of the workers, the people being educated or treated easily leave their own ideas unsaid because they are not needed in that particular situation. The narrative Storycrafting method is meant for encounters, and its instructions emphasize the role of the listener, or recorder (storycrafter). The method aims at democracy and reciprocity in hierarchical power relations, such as those between a teacher and a pupil, the one giving and the one receiving

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treatment, the psychologist and the client, the doctor and the patient, or the parent and the child.

The assessment and education of the child performed by the teacher or the educator will be set aside together with the meta level intentions of the adult in a Storycrafting session. Instead, space and time are given to active listening and writing down the story according to the conditions set by the teller, in a reciprocal process. The Storycrafting method also makes us aware of subtle structures of power which occurs for instance between an adult and a child. According to the study, regular Storycrafting turns the traditional interaction dominated by initiatives of the professional into a reciprocal one (Rautaheimo, 2000). Then there is also space for the initiatives of children, and they are discussed also outside the Storycrafting session (Karlsson, 2000).

The storycrafted stories of children are told, but they are also influenced and characterized by experiences and the inner narrative, just as with adults. In addition, Storycrafting contains playful and imaginary storytelling, which is a flexible and free way of expression. Fairy tales, told either by children or adults, contain information. Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 37) talks about narrative knowing which has a different function than for instance the logical–rationalistic knowing prevalent in schools and the academic world. A story told in interaction is created in relation to the listener, his/her reactions and the narrative situation. But the story also contains views and values which arise from the life and experiences of the teller. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1973) has said, every word is always half someone else's.

The Storycrafting method is based on the following dimensions (Karlsson 2000; 2003; Riihelä, 1991; 1996):

- *Freedom of narrative*. A freely flowing narrative provides the opportunity to tell about things that aremeaningful to the teller, in the way the teller chooses.
- *Tacit knowledge and inner voice made visible*. Every person has information that no one else has.
- *Children (tellers) as producers of information and culture*. The doings of children contain similar elementsof producing culture than adults have.
- *The structuring of experiences in narrative*. The teller tells about things he/she has experienced, seen andheard, varyingly and individually – with the narrative, the teller produces his/her world.
- *Reciprocity and dedicated listening*. The prevailing practice is to arrange reciprocal sessions where there is mutual respect between the teller and the storycrafter (e.g. child and adult).

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- *Reciprocal encountering*, empowering and activating both the teller and the storycrafter.

Because of its democratic structure, the Storycrafting method has spread to different age groups and different countries. Storycrafting is easy to implement in different environments and with different actors and the method has been adapted as a part of normal activity. Storycrafting is one method used in adult education, development cooperation, work with the aged, work with the disabled, social work, production of music, libraries, international cooperation, and in many other different fields. As the only one from Finland[2] from among tens of candidates, Storycrafting was selected a model activity enhancing the mental health of children (Mental Health Europe, 1999). In addition, Storycrafting has been rewarded in global education (Kepa, 2004), and it has been designated a significant social innovation (Taipale, 2006). Storycrafting has been used in many different countries[3].

In addition to practical work with children, Storycrafting has also been used in research. The special nature of research material produced with the Storycrafting method lies in the fact that it has been produced as a part of normal activities with children. It has not been collected only for research purposes, and the material has not been subject to predetermined research hypotheses. Material produced by Storycrafting has been used when it is essential to get an understanding of the child's way of thinking. The data should be respected and not simplified by making too far reaching conclusions through the stories. The idea is rather to gain a window to the world and the knowledge of the child through narrative knowledge. In the case of children in particular, knowledge related to the narrative – also the wordless narrative (Viljamaa, 2012) – is only in the process of being disclosed, and the research practices are taking shape.

Studies have shown that Storycrafting has created time and space to encounter children and share and listen to them. Children are able to influence matters concerning themselves. The research shows that through the method children have been empowered: their self–esteem rises, and they become accustomed to explaining their ideas. With Storycrafting, professionals have a participatory method that can be adapted to different situations.

The research demonstrates that Storycrafting is a workable method for use with children, as well as with youths, people of working age and seniors. Even the youngest

[2] Storycrafting method has been used in many different environments and in many countries besides Finland e.g. in Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Lebanon, Palestine, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Bangladesh, Nepal, China, Australia, USA, Brazil, Ecuador, Namibia, Zambia, Swaziland, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and South Africa.

children have thoughts, experiences, proposals and viewpoints that provide new information and that are needed to develop education, teaching and other activities.

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